

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
#415**

**ROBERT EUGENE DUNCAN
USS *TENNESSEE*, SURVIVOR**

**INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 6, 2001
BY CAPTAIN MARSHALL HANSON &
ETC DAVID JARVIS**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

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**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

Marshall Hanson (MH): We're on? Very good. This is oral history number 415. The following oral history interview was conducted by Captain Marshall Hanson and Chief David Jarvis from the Naval Historical Center, for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial. The interview was done at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, on December 6, 2001 at 14:50. The person being interviewed is Robert Eugene Duncan who was an electrical mate, third class, on the USS *Tennessee* on December 7, 1941.

Robert Duncan (RD): Right.

MH: Are those facts correct?

RD: Yes.

MH: For the record, please state your full name, place of birth or birth date.

RD: Robert Eugene Duncan.

MH: Place of birth?

RD: Portsmouth, Ohio.

MH: And your date of birth.

RD: _____. Oh boy, I'll tell you, that's something.
September 10, 1922. Been so many dates!

MH: And you're only a day older than me. I was born on
September 11.

RD: _____.

MH: What did you consider your hometown in 1941?

RD: Portsmouth, Ohio.

MH: What were your parents' names?

RD: William Clifton Duncan and Ethel Duncan.

MH: Okay, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

RD: I had one brother.

MH: Where did you go to high school?

RD: In Portsmouth, Ohio.

MH: Where and why did you enlist?

RD: All my life I was going to be in the navy and I have never put anything else in, I think, priority over it. My father was in the navy. Seemed like all the relatives in my family was in the navy and I had to be, so I joined.

MH: Now, were your father or any of the relatives career?

RD: No, no.

MH: No, they just went in for a short period of time.

RD: They went—well, probably most of ‘em World War I.

MH: Okay. So where did you enlist?

RD: In Portsmouth, Ohio.

MH: Portsmouth, Ohio.

RD: And sworn in in Cincinnati.

MH: Okay and what month and year was that?

RD: September 16, 1940.

MH: You went to boot camp up at Great Lakes?

RD: No. I went to Norfolk, Virginia.

MH: Norfolk, boot camp. And what were your feelings about that experience?

RD: Well, other than being homesick, it was all right. It never bothered me, like a lot of guys alongside of me, they had a hard time adjusting, I guess.

MH: Okay. When you completed boot camp, where were you ordered to next?

RD: The *Tennessee*, USS *Tennessee*. And it was stationed in Long Beach at that time.

MH: Okay. As an electrician mate, did you get any specialized training, or was it on the job?

RD: No, it was on the job.

MH: So you went aboard the *Tennessee* someone from the BM gang pulled you aside and started teaching you what to do?

RD: No, it wasn't that simple. I had to go in the Third Division, gunnery.

MH: Okay.

RD: One of the turrets, and then I requested E Division and I was told at the time, probably wouldn't be an opening. But about a week later I did get transferred to the E Division. And then it was up to me. I had—see, at that time, they had, oh, a lot of books to read and what they called practical factors,

different phases of electrical work on the ship. And I was, I guess, a pretty good student and I grabbed right on it.

MH: Great. So what day did you report it in to the *Tennessee*?

RD: It was in November, but I don't remember the date.

MH: So November 1940?

RD: Forty.

MH: And at the time, the *Tennessee* was still in southern California?

RD: Yeah, Long Beach.

MH: Long Beach. Can you give us a little idea of what the cruises were like when the *Tennessee* was still in Long Beach?

RD: Well, we'd go out pretty _____ for different drills, I suppose. They had gunnery drills on San Clemente Island and then, oh, at night, torpedo attacks and from destroyers and a lot of stuff like that. And then I wasn't really in any position to know too much about it, being a boot. But I was very curious. (Chuckles) But what they done, I gotta, other than the firing the guns.

MH: Now in E Division, what type of equipment were you working on during this period?

RD: Well, in that time, I was in what they call the lighting shop. We took care of all the lighting on the ship and basically that was it. There was several guys that was assigned to that. We had a chief in charge. And we had to keep the lights on, basically. That's what it was.

MH: Okay. Did you work in any of the other shops...

RD: Oh yes, later I got what they called the main drive shop.

That was the main turbines and the alternators and the light and power generators that supplied everything else. And I studied for that and that's when I started making my rates.

MH: Let's move ahead and we're going to take a look, but the first day we want to look at is December 6, the Saturday before the attack. Do you remember what you were doing on that day?

RD: I don't remember what during the day, but I remember very well that evening! Me and another guy was topside, standing on the, I guess, the fo'c'sle, looking out across the *West Virginia* that was alongside of us, watching the PT boats going out on patrol. And we were talking about the weather and stuff like that. And what a bummer it was we had to go down below deck and there wasn't any air. The *West Virginia* tied up alongside and knocked off all the air

that came in through the portholes. So that was the basic conversation we had that time.

MH: Now, were you on a duty section?

RD: Not that time, no.

MH: So you had the choice, you could've gone ashore or stayed on the ship and it was just...

RD: Well, I don't know. See, they had it broken up into four different liberty sections. Usually one section at a time. And evidently it wasn't my—well, you don't go _____ in Honolulu then, you didn't go every day.

MH: Okay, so...

RD: Because a third class, I made, I think sixty dollars a month at that time. So it didn't go too far.

MH: So three sections stayed aboard, one section had liberty.

RD: And one section went ashore.

MH: Okay. Moving ahead to December 7, can you tell us where and what you were doing before the attack and what made you aware of it and what action you started to take?

RD: Well, at the time, well that day, I think it was a regular routine day on the Sunday. We didn't have any basic things to do. It was what they call a holiday routine. And I had just—well, a little later in the morning, I had breakfast and was setting at the mess table and all at once the alarm went off for general quarters. "All hands man your stations!"

I didn't hear. They always said they said, "This is no drill," but I don't remember hearing that. All I know was, "Go to your battle station," and I did, by the shortest possible route.

Well that was the after engine room and I had to go about, well, I don't know, 150 feet aft and then down, let's see, two levels, to the engine room. And of course there's a lot of confusion and everybody going, but everybody was trying to get to that station there. So we went down and I think it was the guys on the sound-powered phones notified the bridge or whoever that we're on station.

So the next thing you know, they're closing in the watertight doors that you just went through. What they called Condition Zed, that's the ultimate watertight thing. Well, when you're in that condition, the only communication you have is through these sound-powered phones with the topside or whoever that's conducting 'em. And we couldn't find out anything. They was telling us that different ships were sunk, the *Arizona* blew up and we didn't believe it because the smoke and everything started coming down in the vents. Oh boy! That heavy oil smoke, you know. So we

took turns going down in the bilges or below deck there, with rags soaking it up so we could keep _____ clear. And finally they gave orders like we're getting under way. We couldn't figure that out. Well, later you find out different things. But anyway, we started the, fired up the generators and the main engine and the screws was turning and everything was—found out later that was to keep the fire away from the *Arizona*.

So the ship was all jumping or moving or something, pretty hairy! I don't know why I'm getting so emotional.

Then after a while, I guess they kept the engines running all day, to keep that fire back. Well, the stern of the *Tennessee* caught fire from the fuel and fire from the *Arizona*. See, we're only—well, you've been out there, how close, probably wasn't twenty-five feet in distance. But I never got topside. I didn't really know what happened until about seven o'clock

that evening, that we finally got up, they let us go out, opened the watertight doors.

And about the time I got topside, these three planes off of the *Enterprise* came in over the harbor, I guess to find out what was going on. Wrong time. They got shot down. And that was enough for me to head back down in the engine room. _____.

So then it was a case of waiting for getting relieved to eat, take a shower and change clothes. Then they went on a four hour on, four off, four hour off routine for duty. But then eventually we got to go back to our living quarters, and that's where all the rumors were about getting sunk and all that. It was quite a day, I guess.

MH: Now, in Condition Zed, or when I was in the navy, Condition Zebra as they called it then.

RD: Yes.

MH: We're always changing the phonetic alphabet.

RD: Yeah.

MH: You were in a situation where you couldn't even go through the scuttle without permission from the officer of the deck.

RD: That's right.

MH: And probably under general quarters and realistically the ExO [executive officer] or captain.

RD: Yeah, you can't do anything. You're sealed in and that's the ultimate, all _____.

MH: Now, later, when you went up to the weather decks, did they stand down that condition, or did you get permission to go through the scuttles?

RD: They could've gone to Condition Yolk, to allow you to open so many. There were certain doors that was involved in that. So they could have gone from Z to Y, which was yolk, so you could get topside. There was a very limited number of doors that they would do that, 'cause they were still under a little pressure, I guess.

MH: Now, I seem to remember that the *Tennessee* did take a bomb forward.

RD: Yeah, the center gun of the Number One turret was hit and split. I guess it's two or three layers of that steel dropped off. And then on the Number Three turret, I think it was, the high one, took a direct hit. There was a naval shell—I think they said a twelve-inch—that went through the armor, the

top of the turret and it didn't explode. It just broke apart and burned. And I think that was where most of the wounded were, in that turret.

MH: Now, in after engineering, did you feel any of that?

RD: No, not really. It was just a little quiver. You couldn't tell whether the screws were turning...

MH: There was so much noise, you couldn't even hear the explosion.

RD: Yeah and then the smoke and all that coming in the vents, that went on for quite a while before they actually turned the vents off.

MH: How long was it before you heard about the bombs striking the ship?

RD: Probably that evening, when I went topside.

MH: A little bit of a surprise.

RD: Yeah.

MH: Okay. Now, it was several days before the *Tennessee* could be moved. And my understanding is they actually had to explode part of the quay...

RD: Mm-hmm.

MH: ...to where you could ease out forward because the *West Virginia* was basically pinning you in.

RD: Well that, yes, and then the *Maryland* was forward of us. They had to move the *Maryland* so we could slide out. That was quite complicated but they had to explode that, blow it up, that quay.

MH: So did you get to watch any of that or...

RD: No. When you're in engineering, you don't see nothing! It's all _____.

MH: So for the next couple of days, you were standing watch and...

RD: Well...

MH: ...steaming the ship.

RD: Yeah, they took us over to navy yard.

MH: Okay.

RD: From there. And all these hordes of, it seemed like, yard workers came from there and they're welding and

everything. The stern was all ready to fall off, I guess, from the fire. And I was topside then. I'll always remember that. And we got—I remember, I could go off of the ship, when I went down to that dry dock, where the *Cassin* and *Downes* and the *Pennsylvania* were. Somebody told me that there was trouble down there so I went down and I was amazed at how that blew up and what a mess.

And I don't know exactly how long we were there while they made these repairs, but I was topside when they said, "Attention, all yard workers leave the ship immediately."

And they kept repeating. And then all the yard workers was trying to pick up their welding hoses and torches and all that stuff and throw them off on the dock. And then the *Pennsylvania* and the *Maryland* and the *Tennessee* went out the harbor, heading for Bremerton.

Well, the *Pennsylvania* went to San Francisco, I think. But we went onto Bremerton. And we were at sea, I'll always remember, Christmas. And water was running down the third deck passageway. They was trying to pump it out. And it wasn't a very good feeling, you know, you might sink at sea after getting out of that mess!

MH: And this was seawater running down that passageway?

RD: Yeah. From the stern, where the rivets and all that was, I assume. Now, I'll make it plain, a lot of this stuff I didn't see.

MH: Mm-hmm.

RD: I was in a position where I couldn't see. I was in the engine room basically and when we got the, over Christmas, they had the Christmas dinner and stuff like that. Best they could. And I can't remember when we got into Bremerton,

but I know that they passed a pretty stern word, don't say anything about what was sunk, what was damaged. Just freeze. Don't say anything. Well, that was all right. But they forgot a lot of those Bremerton yard workers had brothers on there and family and all that, and boy was we under pressure! Especially when I had the duty to stay on there! That was something.

So we were there, I don't know, maybe three or four weeks and they done some more repairs and then we went down to San Francisco and stayed there for a while. Now that was during the Battle of Midway and Coral Sea and that time period.

MH: Mm-hmm.

RD: So we must have been in pretty good shape then 'cause we would go to sea for the Battle of Midway, we were a backup, you know, the second line. And then we'd come back in. But

I guess that gave the, whatever department they were working on, plans for the remodeling. Because when we got back to Bremerton, they stripped that thing right down to nothing. Just the hull was there and they put new, oh—what am I trying to say? Alternators and took all the turbines apart and redone 'em and in other words, just like a new ship when we went out of there nine months later.

MH: Now, you said you were the second line of defense at Midway.

RD: Yeah, as far as I know.

MH: When you went to Midway, did you sail out of San Francisco or did you return to Pearl Harbor and then go up to Midway?

RD: No, we came out of San Francisco.

MH: And then you went...

RD: Came back to San Francisco.

MH: And then up to Bremerton?

RD: Mm-hmm. That was a certain time period, I don't know. But when we went to Bremerton, evidently they meant business, 'cause they tore that whole superstructure down, changed the whole thing. Actually took the decks off. The third deck or the second deck, they added four inches more of armor plate. And that was something! That thing was that thick!

MH: They wanted that extra protection.

RD: Well, I guess later it came in handy over in the Philippines, but I wasn't on there then.

MH: So what ship did you go to after the *Tennessee*?

RD: Well, I went to Washington, D.C. to interior communications school.

MH: Oh, okay. Now, in those days, did they have the IC men, or was that another job for the electrical?

RD: Well, that was the, it was telephones and sound-powered equipment and stuff like—what am I thinking of? These terms they've got now, I guess—what do they call it? But anyway, I was transferred from there to Mobile, Alabama, then I got on a repair ship.

MH: And what was the name of the repair ship?

RD: *Burias*, USS *Burias*, AG-69. And I stayed on there, oh, let's see, we went from going in commission in Mobile and I took it out of commission back in Pearl Harbor. I think it was about a couple of years, it had to be. And then from there, I went to a fleet tug.

MH: When you brought the repair ship into Pearl Harbor for decommissioning, was that about the next time you had seen Pearl after the attack?

RD: No, well, the *Tennessee* was in and out of there—see, I stayed on the *Tennessee* until 1944.

MH: Okay.

RD: So we got...

MH: You were in and out of there a couple of times on the *Tennessee*.

RD: Yeah.

MH: How did you feel returning to Pearl Harbor on the *Tennessee*?

RD: Well, it was, well, the fires was out and all that and it was real weird because the *Arizona*, the mainmast was flipped over, you know, the forward end of it. Or like it broke off. And that stayed that way for a couple of years, I guess.

But, no, I never felt the same 'cause I had two guys that I joined with, well, three, were on the *Arizona* and two of 'em didn't make it. So, but my first—while we were there, after the attack, the *Enterprise* came in and Halsey was the admiral and I guess he had everybody topside to salute. I guess we still do that, when they go by the *Arizona*.

MH: She's still a commissioned vessel.

RD: Yeah.

MH: Now going back to pre-December 7 days. You talked about how there were four liberty sections, one who was ashore...

RD: Yeah.

MH: ...on liberty, one that had the duty and then I presume two that were on board but didn't have the duty then.

RD: Well, yeah. Only—I can't, I don't remember now how that worked. But I know that if you got, you just had routine, general routine. Well, it wasn't a holiday routine, because you had certain duties to do anyway.

MH: Mm-hmm.

RD: And you _____ even though this one guy was missing, you know, if he was ashore.

MH: When it was holiday routine...

RD: Yeah.

MH: ...where you didn't really have...

RD: Well, guys went ashore, played ball and golf and tennis or whatever. And that's why a lot of 'em got caught in their football suits and golf and tennis. Then they had church services. A lot of guys were getting ready to go to church.

MH: Now, did they have church service right on the *Tennessee*?

RD: Yes.

MH: So they were preparing for church service just before the attack.

RD: Right.

MH: Was that out on the fantail or...

RD: I don't know where. Yes, something was there. They had a regular service for non-denominational, you know.

MH: Now, I imagine with a battleship, you were actually large enough to have a chaplain on board, weren't you?

RD: Yes.

MH: But if you were on board on a normal Sunday, not the seventh, that was a little different situation. How would you spend your holiday routine? What type of activities, such leisure activities would you do if you had the spare time but you weren't allowed ashore?

RD: Well, right on the ship you were free to, you could read. You could just sunbathe, lay around. Usually a lot of guys would bring magazines or papers back with 'em, you know, you could do that. And just generally, just what you would do at home, nothing! If you wanted to go—of course you couldn't

go ashore, but I don't know, you stand around the railing
and everything. It's kind of, what you say, a happy time,
_____.

MH: Now, when I was on active duty, each ship had what they
called a geedunk. Are you familiar with that...

RD: Oh yeah.

MH: So...

RD: Ice cream.

MH: Yeah. So the *Tennessee* had a geedunk and...

RD: Geedunk stand and a small store and well, they had a, one of
the guys in A Division had a, you could buy a block of vanilla
ice cream that he sold. I don't know where the money went

or anything about it, but he done it. And that was something to look forward to.

MH: Just a minute _____ run out on the tape.

Broke my train of thought here. I presume, navy traditions, you had coffee messes and of course in our days you had can pop messes as well.

RD: Yeah, we...

MH: Were some entrepreneurs on board that were running their own little businesses?

RD: Well, no, not too much on that though. We had the coffee. No, that was the only guy. I used to know his name. He just died not too long ago. He made the ice cream and then the geedunk stand.

MH: Okay, great.

RD: That was a root beer float was the main thing then.

MH: Chief, do you have any other questions?

David Jarvis (DJ): Just a quick one, on the day of the attack, when you were in the engine room, you couldn't hear any of the sounds of the explosions?

RD: No.

DJ: Was there any, on the sound-powered phones, were people relaying what they could see above?

RD: Well, they were telling us.

DJ: Telling you, okay.

RD: But we weren't believing it. Now there was one fellow on there, now I want to get this in here, by the name of Champ Adamson. He was a champion heavyweight wrestler of the fleet. And nobody believed anything until Champ Adamson came back aboard. He spent the night, he was married and had a family over there I guess. But when they said Champ Adamson said—well, it's like that commercial, everybody listens. And when Champ Adamson said all these ships were sunk and damaged and everything, well then they kind of woke up. They believed it.

MH: Well, good authoritative source. Well, thank you for sharing your...

RD: Well, I hope I didn't get carried away there.

MH: Oh, no! I appreciate the experience you've shared and thank you for serving our country.

RD: Well, thank you.

(Conversation off-mike)

END OF INTERVIEW